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ABSTRACT

This report was prepared to aid New College in evaluating student attitudes toward the Fall 1970 "First Course," an introductory freshman course. The following findings were based upon the results of a questionnaire completed by 60 students present at the final examination of the course: (1) With the exception of main lectures, all other listed aspects of the course elicited more satisfied than unsatisfied responses. (2) Respondents were relatively satisfied with, and would have desired more visiting lecturers and discussion groups. (3) Respondents were relatively unsatisfied with, and would have desired fewer main lectures. (4) The majority of respondents felt that there should be a First Course or a similar type of experience. (5) Respondents' main suggestions for improvement included: a better organized, clearer, more meaningful course; smaller classes; treating subject matter in greater depth; and providing more background and introductory material. (HS)

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY

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Curricular Evaluation:
Student Attitudes Toward the First Course at New College, Fall, 1970

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HE002689

* New College, Hofstra University's innovative degree-granting undergraduate unit, and the Center for the Study of Higher Education at Hofstra University, have joined in a cooperative program of educational research since 1969. Members of both staffs participate, with the College and the Center pooling resources for the divers projects. Participants in this cooperative venture into educational research include Dr. Harold E. Yuker, Director of the Center; David Christman, Dean of New College; Professor Margaret A. Hofeller, Project Director; and Marina Dean, Research Associate. The following report is a direct result of this jointly conducted research and is one of the continuing series of published documents.

The introduction of a new course designed to serve a specific function in an overall curricular plan presents specific evaluational problems. The techniques employed for general feedback on all courses often miss the mark when particular questions are raised about the relative merits of a given component of a larger curriculum.

New College confronted this problem when, in September, 1970, it introduced a new collegiate curriculum, the Changeover program. This program highlighted increased choice and responsibility for many aspects of a student's academic experience. The traditional foundation of common, required courses was essentially dropped, replaced by only four collegiate courses. One of these, the First Course, titled aptly if not substantively, was designed to introduce freshmen to the quality of scholarly inquiry from an intellectual and philosophical stance. In order to encourage a common freshman educational experience and its consequent spirit of "academic community," the course was offered to the entire freshman class of 150 in a single group, with the entire New College faculty participating.

The class met four days a week for eight weeks. The faculty member primarily responsible for the course was a philosopher; however, he enlisted guest lecturers each week from faculty in all areas of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Once a week, students met in small discussion groups with a faculty member to discuss issues raised in the central lectures. A copy of the course syllabus is attached as Appendix A.

If the new Changeover program were to succeed, the success of this First Course was critical. Therefore, the College undertook to

evaluate the extent to which it met its intended goals.

With the guidance of the faculty involved, a questionnaire (see Appendix B) was designed to elicit from students their perceptions of and responses to those characteristics of the course deemed most salient to its ability to contribute positively to the overall curriculum. The questionnaire asked students to rate those six specific aspects of the course: main lectures, discussion groups, composition papers, course paper, visiting lecturers, and assigned readings, as either Very Satisfactory (VS), Satisfactory (S), Neutral (N), Unsatisfactory (U), or Very Unsatisfactory (VU). In addition, in open-ended questions, students were asked to indicate their reactions to and suggestions about other aspects of the course.

Sample: On January 25, 1971, the questionnaire was administered to those students present at the final examination. Students had been given the option of either writing a term paper or taking a final examination. Eighty-five of 150 students opted to take the final examination. Of these, 60 (40% of all students who took the course, and 71% of those present at the examination) completed the questionnaire. This failure to achieve a complete or unbiased sample of the population of students in the First Course (a not uncommon occurence in course evaluations) necessarily limits the intrepretation of the data. Nonetheless, the available evaluations may provide fruitful feedback within these known limits.

Results: Respondents' attitudes toward specific aspects of the First Course are listed in Table 1. The answers were divided into: Satisfied (S, VS), Unsatisfied, (U, VU), and Neutral. All aspects of the course, (with the exception of the main lectures) elicited more satis-

fied than unsatisfied rating from these respondents. The aspects with which students indicated most satisfaction were: visiting lecturers (62%) and discussion groups (60%). Those with which they indicated most dissatisfaction were: main lectures (50%) and assigned readings (32%).

TABLE 1

Percentages of responses to Question 1:

Rate the following aspects of the First Course

Aspect	N	Responses: Satisfactory %	Unsatisfactory %	Neutral %
Main lectures	60	33	50	17
Discussion groups	60	60	20	20
Composition papers	60	52	25	23
Course paper	52	47	18	22
Visiting lecturers	57	62	12	22
Assigned readings	59	50	32	17

When students were asked which of the above aspects of the First Course they would have liked more of or less of (Table 2), the two

TABLE 2

Percentages of responses to Question 2:
Which of the above categories would you have wanted more of?
Less of?

Category	N*	Responses: More of %	Less of %
Main lectures	31	36	64
Discussion groups	35	86	14
Composition papers	13	15	85
Course paper	0	0	0
Visiting lecturers	22	73	27
Assigned readings	8	26	75
Miscellaneous	5	60	40

*The small n's in several categories limit the meaningfulness of the percentage figures.

categories which elicited the greatest number of "more" responses were discussion groups (86%) and visiting lecturers (73%). The three categories which were cited most often in the "less" category were main lectures (64%) and composition papers (85%) and assigned readings (75%). This apparent reversal in the evaluation of composition papers and assigned readings between Questions 1 and 2 (Tables 1 and 2) as well as the wide differences in the numbers of respondents is illustrative of the importance of the form of an evaluation item. These two facets of the course were seen as satisfactory by 52% and 50% of the respondents respectively, yet, both were more often than not cited, in an open-ended question, as wanted in lesser quantity.

In another open-ended question, students were asked to list what they believed were the objectives of the First Course. The results (Table 3) indicated that the single most common perception of the First Course was as an introductory course to philosophy (31%).

TABLE 3

Frequencies and percentages of responses to Question 3: What do you think were the objectives of the First Course?

Perceived objectives	Responses* N**	%
Introduction to philosophy	16	31
Introduction to new thinking	5	8
Introduction to new learning methods	4	7
Introduction to psychology	2	4
Open students' minds, ways of thinking	14	24
Philosophical evaluation of man and society	4	7
Unclear objectives	8	14
Miscellaneous	3	5
Totals	58	100

*A number of respondents cited more than one objective.
**Note the small n's in some categories.

Approximately one-fourth of respondents believed that the objectives of the course were to stimulate their thinking. Fourteen percent of respondents indicated that they were uncertain of the objectives of the course.

Students were also asked whether or not they thought their perceived objectives were suitable for an introductory course of this type. Their answers are summarized in Table 4. It may be seen that the entire list of objectives was evaluated as predominantly suitable with the minor exception (one of two responses) of that of an introduction to psychology.

TABLE 4

Frequencies and percentages of responses to Question 4: In your opinion, are these suitable objectives for an introductory course of this type? If not, what suggestions do you have?

Objective	N	Responses of "Suitable" Yes %	No %
Introduction to philosophy	14	71	29
Introduction to thinking	5	80	20
Introduction to learning methods	4	100	0
Introduction to psychology	2	50	50
Open students' minds	14	93	7
Philosophical evaluation of man and society	4	100	0
Unclear objectives	8	0	100
Miscellaneous	3	0	100
	54		

Respondents also made comments and suggestions in response to the issue of course objective. Some of the most frequently mentioned were: "The objectives should have been clearer." They were "poorly

accomplished;" "too superficial;" "too difficult;" "too academic." "The course was not necessary for the first year students. Instead, students should have an introduction to their own field." "The course should deal more with the present than with the past;" "...should get students to question;" "should be more relevant to students' needs." "More background material should have been provided." "The lectures were not beneficial." The comments of those students who were unsure of the objectives of the course were that the course was "meaningless" and should be dropped."

Although according to 74% of the 53 respondents to Question 5, there should be a First Course or some similar academic experience, 26% indicated there should not be (Table 5). While most respondents who gave an affirmative answer did not comment further, a small number indicated the course should be improved. Those respondents who gave a negative response indicated their source of dissatisfaction, often in a general manner.

TABLE 5

Percentages of responses to Question 5:
In your opinion, should there be a First Course or any such type experience at all? If not, why not?

Responses	Percent
YES N = 39 (74%)	
Unqualified yes, no comments	49
Good objectives, course	15
Course must be improved	36
	100
NO N = 14 (26%)	
Meaningless course, unclear	43
Should not be mandatory	14
Inappropriate course	22
Miscellaneous	21
	100

The students were asked for suggestions about organizing large

classes. The results are given in Table 6. It may be seen that the majority of respondents (60%) suggested breaking the class down into smaller groups.

TABLE 6

Percentages of responses to Question 6:
What suggestions do you have for organizing large groups of classes, assuming these to be necessary?

Suggestions* (N=35)	Percent
Break into smaller groups	60
Better lecture hall	14
Eliminate large classes	21
Miscellaneous	5
	100

*Respondents may have given more than one suggestion.

With respect to suggestions about the readings, over one-half of respondents did not answer this question at all, or give inappropriate replies (Table 7). Of those who did respond, the greatest number (50%) suggested improving the present readings and 21% suggested continuing with the present list.

TABLE 7

Percentages of responses to Question 7:
Recognizing the unavailability of any single set of readings to cover the material for the First Course, what suggestions do you have?

Suggestions (N=28)	Percent
Continue readings as is	21
Improve readings	50
Suggestions regarding specific course material	29
	100

The last question asked students to list any additional comments

or suggestions which they had about the First Course. Twenty-nine (48%) of the respondents did not answer this question. The results of the 31 respondents are not listed separately, since, for the most part, they reiterate comments and suggestions mentioned in previous part of the questionnaire.

Summary and Conclusions: This report was prepared to aid New College in evaluating student attitudes toward the Fall, 1970 "First Course." The following findings were based upon the results of a questionnaire completed by 60 students present at the final examination of the course:

1. With the exception of main lectures, all other listed aspects of the course elicited more satisfied than unsatisfied responses.

2. Respondents were relatively satisfied with, and would have desired more, visiting lecturers and discussion groups.

3. Respondents were relatively unsatisfied with, and would have desired fewer main lectures.

4. The majority of respondents felt that there should be a First Course or a similar type experience.

5. Respondents' main suggestions for improvement included: a better organized, clearer, more meaningful course; smaller classes; treating subject matter in greater depth; and providing more background and introductory material.

The evaluation was fruitful for the College in that it yielded important information about the First Course, necessary for reasonable change. While it is impossible to guess the quality of responses from those 60% of the freshmen who did not reply to the questionnaire, many

of whom had simply exercised their legitimate option not to take the final exam, the absence of their responses is significant in itself. Collegiate innovation is, after all, a joint responsibility of all members of the community. In addition, then, to continued evaluation of the modified curriculum, efforts should be directed toward increasing student participation in and commitment to that evaluation.

APPENDIX A

FIRST COURSE OUTLINE

Week 1. Homeric ideal - Moses Hadas, Greek Ideal and its Heritage
lecture: Guest lecture in Literature

a. Striving for excellence
b. Embodiment of ideals: gods vs. heroes

Week 2. Proprium (self) and its functions - Gordon Allport, Becoming

a. Propriate striving as unifying principle
b. Selfimage possibly incorporating Homeric Ideal
c. Function of chance and opportunistic learnings in becoming
d. McEwen's Social-Scientific Model

Week 3. Causality and Cosmological argument for God

a. First cause implied
b. Hume's objections and psychological expectations
c. Probability statements replace causal statements
   i. Takes note of contingency in world
   ii. Whitehead's God as 'primordial accident of creativity':
      a) a principle of order...
      b) in a contingent universe

Week 4. The Mechanization of Man - The Broken Image, Ch. 1 (an OVERVIEW)

a. Physicalism,
   1. Whitehead's view that biology's concept of organism replaces physic's notion of mechanism as model for the natural and social sciences
b. Comte's hierarchy of the sciences

Week 5. Behavioristic psychology-man, the alienated machine, The Broken Image, Ch. 2. Lecture: Guest lecture in Psychology

a. Natural law and mechanism
b. Scientific laws as 'empirical generalizations'

Week 6. The Manipulated Society - political science and behaviorism: The Broken Image, Ch. 3. Lecture: Guest lecture in Political Science

a. The problem of dispassionate inquiry
b. The constructive nature of concepts: Lecture: Guest lecture in Mathematics
   i. The use and function of logical fictions, egg. Rousseau's 'general will'; the philosophy of 'as if'
   ii. Objectivity is based on intersubjective agreement
   iii. The fallacy of reification
c. The Is and the Ought - The problem of value determinations in a scientific universe of discourse - Lecture: Guest lecture in Anthropology

Week 7. The New Physics - An Uncertain World: The Broken Image, Ch. 4.
Lecture: Guest lecture in Physics

a. Decline of mechanism
b. The Quantum Revolution - discontinuity in the universe
c. The Uncertainty Principle
   i. Phenonmenology of Self-awareness
   ii. Uncertainty of 'speaking' vs. the 'spoken word'.

Week 8. Humanism and the Modern World - The New Sensibility

a. Existential man
b. The culture of literary modernism: Lecture: Guest lecture in Philosophy
c. Modernism and the Fine Arts - Lecture: Guest lecture in Art
d. Modernism and the Contemporary Theater. Lecture: Guest lecture in Drama

Texts: Matson, Floyd - The Broken Image - Doubleday Anchor

Hadas, Moses - The Greek Ideal and Its Heritage

Allport, Gordon - Becoming - Yale paperback

APPENDIX B

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NEW COLLEGE OF HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY

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THE CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

First Course Evaluation Questionnaire

January, 1971

1. Please rate the following aspects of the First Course according to the following code:

VS = Very Satisfactory
S = Satisfactory
N = Neutral
U = Unsatisfactory
VU = Very Unsatisfactory

A)_____Main lectures
B)_____Discussion Groups
C)_____Composition papers
D)_____Course paper
E)_____Visiting lecturers
F)_____Assigned readings

2. Which of the above categories would you have wanted more of? _____

_____

Less of? _____

3. What do you think were the objectives of the First Course? _____

_____

_____

4. In your opinion, are these suitable objectives for the introductory course of this type? If not, what suggestions do you have? _____

_____

_____

5. In your opinion, should there be a First Course, or any such type experience at all? If not, why not? _____

_____

_____

6. What suggestions do you have for organizing large groups of classes, assuming these to be necessary? _____

_____

_____

7. Recognizing the unavailability of any single set of readings to cover the material for the First Course, what suggestions do you have? _____

_____

_____

8. Please list any other comments or suggestions which you have pertaining to the First Course._____

_____

_____